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ABSTRACT

Letter poems make poetry accessible, meaningful, and fun. Letter poems are also an apt medium for exploring a defining characteristic of poetry--line breaks. Students explore letter poems and experiment with writing letters as poems, using the placement of line breaks to enhance rhythm, sound, meaning, and appearance. During the two 40-minute sessions, students in grades 3-5 will: explore and discuss various poems to demonstrate a growing awareness of how line breaks affect rhythm, sound, meaning, impact, and appearance, and can substitute for punctuation in letter poems; and demonstrate their understanding of line breaks and how format creates dramatic effect by writing their own letter poems. The instructional plan, lists of resources, student assessment/reflection activities, and a list of National Council of Teachers of English/International Reading Association (NCTE/IRA) Standards addressed in the project are included. A rubric, "Dear Grandma" as letter and poem, and a sample list of letter or e-mail addresses and purposes are attached. (RS)

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Letter Poems Deliver: Experimenting with Line Breaks in Poetry Writing

ED 480 885

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Grade Band

3-5

Estimated Lesson Time

Two 40-minute sessions

Overview

Letter poems, where communicating a message is central, make poetry accessible, meaningful, and fun for children. Letter poems are also a particularly apt medium for exploring a defining characteristic of poetry—line breaks. As students work to transform narrative-style letters into poetic format, they are forced to think carefully about where to end each line. In this lesson students explore various letter poems and experiment with writing letters as poems, with attention to why the lines are broken where they are and how line breaks affect rhythm, sound, meaning, and appearance.

From Theory to Practice

Dunning, Stephen, and William Stafford. (1992). *Getting the Knack: 20 Poetry Writing Exercises 20.* Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

- Poetry is part of everyday life and can be created from everyday experiences, language, and thoughts, as are found in letters.
- Poetry is made accessible to children by helping them understand its special characteristics and how these work.
- Poetry celebrates self-expression and can bring much pleasure to readers and writers.
- Poetry, because it is generally brief and vivid, is appropriate for all children in a classroom, despite diverse reading and writing ability levels. Letter poems make poetry even more accessible because letters are a relatively familiar genre.

Further Reading
Dunning, Stephen, and William Stafford. 1992. "Found and Headline Poems." *Getting the Knack: 20 Poetry Writing Exercises 20.* Urbana, NCTE.

Student Objectives

Students will

1. explore and discuss various poems to demonstrate a growing awareness of how line breaks affect rhythm, sound, meaning, impact, and appearance, and can substitute for punctuation in letter poems.
2. demonstrate their understanding of line breaks and how format creates dramatic effect by writing their own letter poems.

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Resources

- Rubric for Letter Poems Lesson
- Dear Grandma Letter and Poem
- Sample List of Adressees and Purposes
- Venn Diagram Interactive
- MarcoPolo EdSitement Web Site
- William Carlos Williams' "This is Just to Say"
- The Academy of American Poets Web Site
- Letter Poem Interactive

Instructional Plan

Resources

1. William Carlos Williams's "This is Just to Say" written on chart paper in letter form (with a salutation added) and on a separate piece of chart paper as a poem.
2. Copies for each student of the poem "Dear Grandma" written as a letter and on a separate piece of paper as a poem (see attached). (Or you can select a similar poem from the Web Resources or a book such as *Getting the Knack* (cited above), or use a letter poem you have written to model your literacy for students.
3. Chart paper or board space for writing ideas.
4. Optional, for more examples of letter poems: Chapter 2, "Poems in Response" section of *Getting the Knack*.

Preparation

1. This lesson assumes that students have already been introduced to poetry. The lesson "What Makes Poetry? Exploring Line Breaks" is a good precursor to this lesson.
2. Browse, select, and gather resources, making copies of "Dear Grandma" (or an alternative) in letter and poem forms.
3. Write "This is Just to Say," in letter and poem forms, on chart paper.

Instruction and Activities

Session One

1. Ask students to informally share what they think is the difference between a letter and a poem. Discuss how line breaks are one characteristic way in which poetry and prose, like letters, differ, yet some poems seem like they could also be written as prose. Explain that today we will focus on letter poems. Letter poems sound like letters and communicate personal messages like letters, but are written in the form of poems. Ask students to talk about letters they might have written—letters to friends, thank you letters, business letters, letters they wrote but perhaps never sent (share your own examples, too). Explain that many of these could be turned into a powerful poem. The same is true of e-mail messages (in essence, informal letters). Discuss how students and their families may use e-mail in their daily lives. E-mail messages can also be turned into effective poems.
2. As a group look at the letter form of "This is Just to Say" on chart paper and read it aloud. With student input, demonstrate on chart paper or board how this letter might be made into a poem using line breaks. As students suggest where to place line breaks, ask for their rationale. Talk about why lines are broken where they are in poetry (effect on sound, meaning, appearance, emotional impact). When students are satisfied with the poem they have created from the letter, show them the original poem version by William Carlos Williams. Compare this with the student-created poem. Read both aloud (and compare with another read-aloud of the letter format).

Discuss differences in line breaks and possible reasons for these differences, noting that a poem's format is the author's decision. In particular, focus on why Williams might have chosen to set it up the way he did—how he used line breaks to affect meaning, sound, appearance, and emotional impact or emphasis, as well as to replace punctuation.

3. Next students will work in small groups looking at a letter poem, "Dear Grandma" in letter form and rewriting it as a poem (as has just been modeled in the large group). Tell them to experiment with making the letter into a poem by using line breaks. This can be done on paper or computer, using a word-processing program, which makes playing around with alternatives very easy. Circulate and support small-group work. Encourage students to read aloud their results and compare with a read-aloud of the letter form.
4. Once each small group has rewritten the letter as a poem, ask them to share with the whole class what they did and why. If they composed on a computer, copies can be printed for all students to look at, or each group can quickly transfer its handwritten version to an overhead. This sharing of poems should lead to further general discussion both about how line breaks function and authorial choice.
5. Finally, tell students that this letter was originally a poem. Hand out the poem "Dear Grandma" and discuss similarities and differences with how they turned the letter into poem. Focus on thinking about why the author wrote it as she did (e.g., why are some lines so short and others much longer?). Ask students to summarize what they have learned about line breaks. As this sessions ends, tell them they will be writing their own letter or e-mail poems next time and should start thinking about ideas for these.
6. Before the next session students can further experiment with line breaks using the Word Mover, which invites manipulation of line breaks in an online poem. Similar to magnetic poetry, this interactive encourages experimentation with a poem's format to create the desired effect.

Session Two

1. At the beginning of the second session review briefly what you did in Session One by asking students to summarize the activities and what they learned or still have questions about. The online, interactive Venn Diagram Web Resource can be used to have them compare letters and poems, as a way to organize their review of the previous day's work. This resource could be used during (as a whole group) or after (independently or in pairs) the oral discussion of what they've learned.
2. Remind students that they will write their own letter or e-mail poems today. Have students brainstorm some ideas for addressee and purpose for their letters (see Sample List for ideas or visit the MarcoPolo NEH EdSitement Web Resource for numerous sample letters and ideas. Get enough ideas on the table so that every student has some sense of what they might write and to whom (or what).
3. Explain that each student will compose the letter, or e-mail message, first and then rewrite it as a poem. Model starting one yourself, beginning with "Dear...."
4. Provide quiet time for thinking and writing, and after awhile invite a few students to share their work so far. As students finish their letters or e-mail messages have them transform these into poems.
5. Once the poems are drafted, invite students to confer with a partner or group, get feedback on their poems, and perhaps revise their work, thinking about how the format affects meaning, impact, and sound when read aloud. Final drafts may be shared aloud or published in a class collection of letter poems, or sent, if e-mail messages.

Web Resources

The Academy of American Poets
http://www.poets.org/poems/search.cfm
The Academy of American Poets website includes a wealth of wonderful poetry. Browse for other examples to use in this lesson or invite students to browse as follow up.

William Carlos Williams' "This is Just to Say"
http://www.poets.org/poems/poems.cfm?prmID=1380

Letter Poem Interactive
http://www.readwritethink.org/materials/letter_poem/index.html
The Letter Poem Interactive demonstrates for students how to rearrange words from a letter to make a poem.

MarcoPolo EdSitement Web Site
http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=294
This Web site offers a wide range of interesting ideas for letter addressees and topics, and includes sample letters.

Venn Diagram Interactive
http://www.readwritethink.org/materials/venn/index.html

Guy Noir Episode from November 30, 2002
http://prairiehome.org/performances/20021130/noir.shtml
In this Prairie Home Companion "Guy Noir" episode, private eye Guy Noir investigates a poetic catastrophe with the help of the Poet Laureate of the United States, Billy Collins. In search of a poet who is "flooding the world with awful poems. Dreadful poems." In the process of the investigation, Collins shares many parodies of William Carlos Williams' poem, "This is Just to Say." This Web page includes the complete transcript of the episode and a link to an audio recording. Even if the entire transcript is not suitable for your classroom, the parodies may work for your students, and the transcript is surely a delight for teachers who know the Williams' poem.

Student Reproducibles and Other Resources

1. Dear Grandma Letter and Poem
2. Sample List of Adressees and Purposes

Student Assessment/Reflections

Rubric for Letter Poems Lesson

NCTE/IRA Standards

1 - Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.

2 - Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.

3 - Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

6 - Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and

punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts.

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Rubric for Letter Poems Lesson

	Strong evidence	Some evidence	Little evidence
Student Involvement			
1. Demonstration of engagement, interest, and effort in looking at and talking about the letters and poems presented.			
Oral Participation			
1. Contribution of background knowledge about letters and poems.			
2. Formation of hypotheses about line breaks.			
3. Understanding of line breaks as special to poetry.			
4. Understanding of line breaks as a deliberate choice by the poet.			
5. Understanding of how line breaks may affect a poem's sound, meaning, appearance, and emotional impact.			
6. Understanding of how writing a letter in poetic form may heighten its impact.			
7. Understanding of how line breaks may substitute for punctuation.			
Student Writing			
1. Experimentation with line breaks.			
2. Use of line breaks to contribute to the sound, meaning or appearance of their poems.			
3. Explanation why they broke the lines the way they did.			
4. Revision of line breaks to better capture their intentions.			

"Dear Grandma" as Letter and Poem
by Julie Wollman-Bonilla

Dear Grandma,

I was so young, really when you died. But I remember your sharp smell of mothballs, your teeth soaking in a cup, while you listened to talk radio. Your quick sense of humor, your red and white picnic cloth dress. Your chicken soup. You put in your teeth, put on your tablecloth dress, and walked me to Brigham's for a mocha fudge cone. Your worry, a cage I hated. Your love, a cushion I needed.

Dear Grandma

I was so young, really
When you died.

But I remember
Your sharp smell of mothballs
Your teeth soaking in a cup
While you listened to talk radio.
Your quick sense of humor
Your red and white picnic cloth dress.
Your chicken soup.
You put in your teeth
Put on your tablecloth dress
And walked me to Brigham's
For a mocha fudge cone.

Your worry
A cage
I hated.

Your love
A cushion
I needed.

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Sample List of Letter or E-mail Addresses and Purposes

Addressee	Purpose
A Relative (may no longer be alive)	Express confusion
cousin	Ask questions
grandparent	Share hopes or dreams
parent	Express anger
aunt or uncle	Express caring
great-grandparent	Express a sense of rejection
	Ask for something you want
A Famous Person	Express uncertainty
music star	Share bad news
movie star	Say something you can't in person
TV personality	Ask for help
President	Ask for information
	Share your views
An Historical Figure	Share information
Martin Luther King, Jr.	Imagine what it must be like to be addressee
Abraham Lincoln	
Elizabeth Cady Stanton	
A Friend	
An Object	
favorite trinket	
key chain	
backpack	
toy	
eating utensils	
shoes	
An Animal	
favorite wild animal	
pet	
desired pet	
stuffed animal	

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